

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 2

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The World Socialist Web Site is publishing The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) which was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Colombo, 27–29 May, 2011. It appears in 12 parts.

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4. The LSSP's turn to the Fourth International

4-1. The Fourth International was founded at a secret meeting held in Paris in September 1938 of 30 delegates from 11 countries. Although unable to send delegates, three Asian parties—in China, French Indochina, and Australia—affiliated as sections of the Fourth International. *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* written by Trotsky and adopted at the conference declared: “All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet ‘ripened’ for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn now is to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”[3] The program outlined “a system of *transitional demands*, stemming from today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.”[4] The transitional demands were to develop the revolutionary initiative and consciousness of the working class, not to water down the program to the existing consciousness of workers.

4-2. The founding document succinctly summed up the perspective of Permanent Revolution based on the combined and uneven development of capitalism: “Colonial and semicolonial countries are backward countries by their very essence. But backward countries are part of a world dominated by imperialism. Their development, therefore, has a *combined* character: the most primitive economic forms are combined with the last word in capitalist technique and culture. In like manner are defined the political strivings of the proletariat in the backward countries: the struggle for the most elementary achievements of national independence and bourgeois democracy is combined with the socialist struggle against world

imperialism. Democratic slogans, transitional demands, and the problems of socialist revolution are not divided into separate historical epochs in this struggle, but stem directly from one another.”[5]

4-3. In a letter to Indian workers in July 1939, Trotsky further elaborated on the political issues they faced in the impending war. “Agents of the British government depict the matter as though the war will be waged for the principles of ‘democracy’ which must be saved from fascism. All the classes and peoples must rally around the ‘peaceful’, ‘democratic’ governments so as to repel fascist aggressors. The ‘democracy’ will be saved and peace stabilised forever. This gospel rests on a deliberate lie. If the British government were really concerned with the flowering of democracy then a very simple opportunity to demonstrate this exists: let the government give complete freedom to India.”[6] While not minimising the danger of fascism, Trotsky insisted that the main enemy of oppressed classes and peoples was at home. In India, that meant British imperialism whose overthrow would deliver a massive blow to all oppressors, including the fascist dictators.

4-4. Trotsky was scathing in his appraisal of the Indian bourgeoisie: “They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price, and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet! Gandhi and his compeers have developed a theory that India's position will constantly improve, that her liberties will continue to be enlarged, and that India will gradually become a Dominion on the road of peaceful reforms. Later on, perhaps even achieve independence. The entire perspective is false to the core.”[7]

4-5. Turning to the role of Stalinism, Trotsky explained that as in other countries, the Soviet bureaucracy subordinated the interests of the Indian masses to its diplomatic manoeuvres with the “democratic powers”—advocating the right to self-determination for peoples under fascist domination, but continued subjugation for the colonies of Britain, France and America. To wage a struggle against British imperialism and the approaching war meant a complete break with Stalinism. That was precisely the issue that confronted the LSSP leaders who turned towards the Fourth International. Selina Perera was sent to Britain and the United States in 1939 to make contact with Trotskyist leaders in Europe and North America and, though the attempt failed, to meet with Trotsky.

4-6. In December 1939, the Trotskyist faction threw down the gauntlet to supporters of Stalinism within the LSSP by moving the following

motion in the LSSP's Executive Committee: "Since the Third International has not acted in the interests of the international revolutionary working class movement, while expressing its solidarity with the Soviet Union, the first workers' state, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party declares that it has no faith in the Third International." The motion was passed 29 to 5. The Stalinists and their supporters broke from the party, forming the United Socialist Party in November 1940 and then the Ceylon Communist Party in July 1943.

4-7. Leslie Goonewardene wrote a critique of Stalinism entitled: "The Third International Condemned," in which he highlighted the opportunist shifts of the Communist parties in Britain and France in 1939 from support for the imperialist war to opposition to it. He pointed out that the wild political swings were dictated by the about-face in the Kremlin from unprincipled manoeuvres with the "democratic powers"—Britain and France—to the signing of the Stalin-Hitler Pact in August 1939. He concluded: "The Second International betrayed the working class in the war of 1914–18. Today the Third International, by subordinating the international revolutionary movement to Soviet Union foreign policy, is committing another betrayal. It is our duty to point out this fact." [8]

4-8. The breakaway by the Stalinists and the LSSP's turn to the Fourth International marked a decisive shift in its class axis and the political reorientation of the party on the basis of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. Above all, the LSSP leaders recognised that the fight against imperialist oppression and for socialism in Sri Lanka was indissolubly bound up with struggles of the working class in India and internationally. In a farsighted step, the LSSP called for the formation of an all-India party as a section of the Fourth International to integrate the struggles of workers throughout the subcontinent against British imperialism. In accordance with this strategic turn, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) was founded in 1942. The available histories of the LSSP, reflecting its subsequent degeneration in the 1950s, either ignore the experience of the BLPI or treat it as a hopeless adventure in revolutionary romanticism. But it was precisely in its break from the radical, nationalist outlook of Samasamajism and its reorientation on the basis of proletarian internationalism that the BLPI made an indelible contribution to the struggle for Marxism in South Asia and internationally that continues to hold crucial political and theoretical lessons for workers and youth today.

4-9. With the approach of war, Stalin set out to destroy the newly-established Fourth International and, above all, to eliminate Trotsky himself. Stalin feared that the revolutionary convulsions, which the war would necessarily produce, would immensely strengthen the Trotskyist movement, including in the Soviet Union, posing a direct challenge to the Soviet bureaucracy. Prior to the founding of the Fourth International, the GPU, aided by a network of agents planted inside the Trotskyist movement, murdered Erwin Wolf, one of Trotsky's secretaries; Ignace Reiss, a defector from the GPU who declared his support for Trotsky; Trotsky's son and close collaborator Leon Sedov; and Rudolf Klement, secretary of the Fourth International. After a failed assassination attempt in May 1940, Trotsky was assaulted by GPU agent Ramon Mercader on August 20, 1940 in his home in Coyoacán, Mexico, and died the following day. Trotsky's assassination was the political crime of the century and a profound blow to the international working class. He was the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, the irreconcilable opponent of Stalinism, and the last and greatest representative of the traditions of classical Marxism that had inspired the mass revolutionary workers' movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

5. The founding of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India

5-1. From the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939 between Britain and France, on one side, and Nazi Germany and its allies on the other, the LSSP categorically opposed any support for the war. When CNC leader D.S. Senanayake moved a resolution in the State Council giving "whole-hearted support" to the British government, Philip Gunawardena denounced the war between the two imperialist camps, declaring: "We refuse to be a part of any imperialist war. We are against all imperialist wars and exploitation. The class struggle has refused to stop because a country is at war." [9] The LSSP played the leading role in a wave of strikes among plantation workers that began at the Mooloya Estate in December 1939 where police shot dead a tea factory worker, Govindan. As the strikes spread, culminating in the formation of a workers' council on the Wewessa Estate in May 1940, prominent planters demanded action against the LSSP, warning "that the aggravating situation in Ceylon might lead towards bloodshed and rioting ... with undoubted repercussions of the utmost seriousness in India." Police unleashed a reign of terror throughout the tea estates. On June 18, just days after the fall of Paris to the Nazi armies, the LSSP was banned and four leaders—Philip Gunawardena, N.M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva and Edmund Samarakkody—were arrested. The party had already made preparations for illegality and continued to function in Sri Lanka throughout the war, despite the imposition of martial law.

5-2. In May 1940, the LSSP began sending members to India to contact groups of Trotskyist sympathisers and lay the groundwork for an all-India party. The LSSP gained the support of three groupings—in Calcutta led by Ajit Kumar Mukherji Roy and Kamalesh Banerji; in the industrial city of Kanpur led by Onkarnath Verma Shastri; and in Bombay led by Chandravadan Shukla. Both Shastri and Shukla had been members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) but opposed the turn to Popular Frontism and broke from the party in the late 1930s. Under conditions of illegality, the LSSP convened two secret meetings in Kandy in December 1940 and March 1941 to lay the basis for a single Trotskyist party of India, Burma and Ceylon. Both meetings were attended by the jailed LSSP leaders, who had recruited their jailer. The second involved delegates from India. Recognising that a politically explosive situation with profound revolutionary implications was developing in India, most LSSP leaders moved to the mainland. On April 7 1942, the four LSSP leaders walked out of their Kandy prison, with their jailer, and successfully evaded a police dragnet to reach India. In May 1942, a meeting of LSSP and Indian Trotskyist leaders formally established the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), adopted a program and sought affiliation to the Fourth International.

5-3. The founding of the BLPI represented a milestone in the struggle for revolutionary Marxism in South Asia. Nothing that they subsequently did can detract from the achievement of the BLPI leaders in introducing Trotskyism into the Indian subcontinent. In marked contrast to the LSSP's amorphous 1935 platform with its limited call for socialism in Sri Lanka, the BLPI's program was firmly rooted in proletarian internationalism. It was based on the recognition that the struggle against imperialist oppression and for socialism in Sri Lanka was completely bound up with socialist revolution in India and internationally. The program made a comprehensive analysis of British rule in India, the emergence of capitalism, the role of the various classes and of all the political parties, and elaborated a series of transitional demands based on the founding program of the Fourth International.

5-4. The BLPI exposed the politics of compromise of the Indian National Congress, its close connection to the landlords and its betrayal of the mass civil disobedience movements of the early 1920s and 1930s. Turning to Gandhi's "non-violence", it explained that through this doctrine "the bourgeoisie have attempted to ensure their control of the national movement by restricting the form and scope of the struggle and insuring against its moving into revolutionary channels." The BLPI denounced as "flagrant deception" the attempts of the Stalinists to justify their collaboration with the INC by declaring it to be a multi-class party. Congress was, it warned, above all in its political leadership, akin to the bourgeois Kuomintang in China that crushed the 1925–27 revolution.

5-5. The close connection of the Indian bourgeoisie to the landlords meant that Congress was organically incapable of meeting even the most elementary needs of the peasantry. "The leadership of the revolution, which the peasantry cannot provide for itself, can come only from an urban class. But the Indian bourgeoisie cannot possibly provide this leadership, since in the first place, it is reactionary through and through on the land question itself, sharing as it does so largely in the parasitic exploitation of the peasantry. Above all, the bourgeoisie, on account of its inherent weakness and dependence on imperialism itself, is destined to play a counter-revolutionary role in the coming struggle for power." [10] The BLPI elaborated a series of demands starting with "the abolition of landlordism without compensation" and including the slogans "land to the tillers of the soil" and the "liquidation of agricultural indebtedness" as the means for mobilising the peasantry, particularly its most oppressed layers, behind the working class in the struggle for power.

5-6. The BLPI exposed the role of the CPI, founded in 1920, which had been thoroughly corrupted by Stalinism. As it had done in China, the Comintern instructed the CPI in the 1920s to pursue an alliance with the so-called "revolutionary" sections of the bourgeoisie, organised in the Indian National Congress. With a view to prodding Congress to the left, the CPI was further directed to focus its energies on building "dual class" worker and peasant parties with a bourgeois-democratic program, thereby further eroding its class independence and rendering it incapable of boldly fighting for the leadership of the working class. In the early 1930s, following the Third Period line, the CPI coupled continued advocacy of the Stalinist-Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution with rhetorical denunciations of the Indian National Congress. It stood aloof from the second mass civil disobedience movement, refusing to directly challenge the Congress leadership. With the turn to the Popular Front in the mid-1930s, the CPI even more openly and crudely promoted the INC as the protagonist of the struggle against British rule, even as Congress accepted the 1935 constitutional reforms and became a partner in colonial rule by forming ministries in a majority of the provinces of British India. The latter part of the 1930s saw a militant upsurge of the working class that came into open conflict with the Congress ministries, and a wave of peasant struggles, including the rapid growth of *Kisan Sabhas* (peasant associations). The Stalinists strove to harness these movements to the INC, constraining the struggles of the working class to economic demands and dropping the call for the abolition of the *zamindari* landlord system for fear it would lead to a confrontation with the Congress leadership.

5-7. After the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939, the CPI shifted from support for the "democratic" powers against fascism to opposition to the war. In another about-face following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CPI gave its full support to Britain and acted as the chief strike-breaker and advocate of the imperialist war in the working class. Summing up the CPI's treachery, the BLPI declared: "Today, this attitude is the most shameful and callous of all, since in servile obedience to the counterrevolutionary Kremlin clique, they are

openly advocating unconditional and active support of the imperialist war. With its false theory of the National Front, the CPI is making ready to repeat the betrayal of the Chinese Revolution by handing over the leadership of the revolutionary struggle to the treacherous bourgeoisie. The Communist Party of India, because of the prestige it seeks to obtain from the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union, is today the most dangerous influence within the working class of India. [11]

5-8. Turning to the Congress Socialist Party, the BLPI declared that it had "from the beginning followed a policy of utter subservience to the Congress bourgeoisie, and remains today completely without a base within the working class. Surrendering its claim to an independent existence, the CSP has been split wide open by the Communists who worked within it, and is today an empty shell, devoid of political substance." It insisted that only the BLPI, "with its revolutionary strategy based on the accumulated experience of history and the theory of Permanent Revolution in particular, can lead the working class to revolutionary victory." [12]

5-9. The BLPI firmly supported the Fourth International's defence of the Soviet Union against imperialist intrigue and attack. On the outbreak of World War II, Trotsky had waged a political struggle against a faction inside the American section, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), led by Max Shachtman, James Burnham and Martin Abern, who argued that the Soviet Union could no longer be considered a degenerated workers' state and that the Fourth International should not call for its defence in the event of it being drawn into the war. The USSR, however, still rested on the nationalised property relations established by the Russian Revolution despite the impact of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its betrayals. Behind Burnham's redefinition of the Soviet Union as "bureaucratic collectivism" was the pessimistic conclusion that it represented a new form of society, not foreseen by Marxism, dominated and run by a managerial elite. This acceptance of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a permanent feature of society, rather than a temporary, cancerous excrescence on the workers' state, flowed from a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and the nature of the imperialist epoch as the death agony of capitalism. The arguments advanced by Burnham and Shachtman were to foreshadow a long line of attacks on Marxism that emerged after World War II. While their conclusions varied, all of these revisionist groupings—whether in the form of various theories of "state capitalism" or Michel Pablo's "centuries of deformed workers' states"—regarded the Stalinist regimes as having historical validity and wrote off the working class as a revolutionary force.

To be continued

Footnotes:

3. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977) p. 112.

4. Emphasis in the original; *ibid*, p. 114.

5. Emphasis in the original; *ibid*, p. 137.

6. *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939–40)* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001) pp. 29–30.

7. *Ibid*, pp. 30–31.

8. *Blows Against the Empire: Trotskyism in Ceylon the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, 1935–1964* (London: Porcupine Press: Socialist Platform, 1997) pp. 64–67.

9. Quoted in George Jan Lerski, *Origins of Trotskyism in Ceylon: a documentary history of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, 1935–1942* (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1968) p. 206.

10. Charles Wesley Ervin, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement*

in India and Ceylon, 1935–48 (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2006) p. 300.

11. Ibid., Appendix B, p. 304.

12. Ibid., p. 305.



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